

# The Columbus Dispatch Voter's Guide

## Candidate Questionnaire – Westerville Board of Education

**Candidate: John Sodt**



**Education:** M.S. Business Management, University of Arkansas, B.S. Business Administration, Capital University

**Experience:** 35 years finance, personnel, and project management experience in large multi-million dollar organizations.

**Family:** Married, four children who graduated from Westerville North High School

**Campaign Website:** [www.forResponsibleChange.com](http://www.forResponsibleChange.com)

**The fate of the magnet schools has been a point of debate for the district for the past few years. The program was cut nearly two years ago but continues to operate in a pared-down form. What should become of the program and the aging buildings that housed it?**

The Westerville magnet program was one of the highest performing and most popular in the district. As a board member, I will work to reinstate it, and to expand it if possible. It brought significant value to the students who participated. The state's high rating of the buildings which offered it is testimony to the quality of the learning experience.

A second and no less important reason for its restoration is to alleviate overcrowding in some of our elementary schools. Termination of the magnet program created capacity problems that the board tried to solve by redistricting and changing bus routes. Parents were incensed, causing the board to back down and stop the redistricting. Bringing back the magnet program will both restore a high quality academic offering and relieve pressure on crowded classrooms.

**With 40 percent of college-bound Ohio students needing remedial coursework, how can the school board work to better ensure that Westerville graduates are fully prepared for college or careers?**

The Ohio Board of Regents report of a remediation rate in the neighborhood of 40% for Westerville's college-bound students is a community embarrassment, and absolutely unacceptable. The school board bears direct responsibility for allowing this situation to deteriorate to such a degree. It has an obligation to analyze the data, get to the root of the problem, and to hold the administration accountable for dramatic improvement. Jim Burgess and I are experienced data analysts, and Luke Davis performs root cause analysis and performance improvement work for a multi-national corporation. Our backgrounds are ideally suited to this task.

## **What can be done to strengthen the middle-school program?**

Westerville's middle schools have fallen far behind those in many other Central Ohio school districts. A comparison of curriculum offerings with those of neighboring systems shows Westerville with far fewer non-core electives. In fact, if a student isn't in band or art, lack of other options results in two study halls daily. In this age of technology, even the technology classes have been eliminated. Parents are dissatisfied and vocal, and justifiably so. Our kids deserve as good an education as those in other school districts that are spending equivalent dollars-per-student. We need to bring the class offerings back up to speed immediately.

## **What program areas do you believe the district should focus on, and how can they be improved?**

Our initial focus shouldn't be on individual programs, but on students and the overall quality of their education. Westerville's course catalog has been deteriorating for quite some time, and it needs to be improved. Last year, the Board of Education dropped computer technology classes in the middle schools in this era of high technology applications. Our immediate focus should be to put our curriculum on a par with those in Central Ohio's highest-performing districts. Then, we can fine-tune the offerings as necessary.

## **How do you assess the district's financial position? What can be done to improve it?**

As outlined in the May 2013 presentation of the five-year forecast, the district has excess money generated by the last tax levy through fiscal year 2015. Then things deteriorate rapidly in fiscal 2016 and 2017. Salaries are projected to increase 7.7% between 2015 and 2017, and benefits will cost 16.8% more during the same period.

That's why Jim Burgess, Luke Davis and I propose "Students First" management, beginning with next year's budget. We will give restoration of education-related cuts top priority. We will spend the next two years going over our business practices, contracts, purchasing procedures, etc., and start getting more control over the way the district spends money. Cuts which directly impair the student experience are a sign of bad management. More explanation is available at [www.ForResponsibleChange.com](http://www.ForResponsibleChange.com).

## **What steps do you believe the board can take to engage the community and heal community rifts?**

Healing begins when the public develops confidence that its school board is working hard to deliver education at a high level, while putting minimal burden on its taxpayers. This entails listening respectfully to parents, businesspeople, taxpayers, employees and other stakeholders in the quality of the district, and responding to the issues they raise. When board members have gained a reasonable level of credibility, they can lead by example and open new avenues of communication within the school district. Those rifts will not be repaired until each board member treats it as a priority.

## What makes you the best candidate for this job?

Many years ago, my service in the United States Air Force instilled in me a sense that public service is both an obligation and an honor. I am pleased to be able to apply my thirty-five years of financial, project and personnel management experience for the benefit of the Westerville schools.

Together with Jim Burgess and Luke Davis, I will pursue Students First management to return the Board of Education to its intended focus of representing students, parents and taxpayers. We will examine in detail the way the district operates, and find ways to reduce, eliminate and share costs. And four years from now, we will have our schools delivering a better quality of education more efficiently than when we started.

## Is there anything else you'd like to tell the voters?

Jim, Luke and I are running as a team because we know that electing only one of us will not bring about the change we propose. Unless there is a majority on the school board willing to undertake the Students First approach, the district will continue following the path of spending 85% of its operating budget on salaries/benefits, and turning out graduates with a 40% remediation rate. If you agree that **responsible** change is needed, please vote for all three of us. Together, we will not disappoint you.